

[Early Life in Questa]

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By Frank V. Garcia

I can still see grandmother sitting in her chair at the fireplace, her wrinkled face shining in its fitful light, as she told me stories of her early life. I settled myself more comfortably on my warm sheep-skin and she proceeded.

“Questa was settled by five pioneers in 1830. The most prominent of the group was Don Benito, who at that time had thirty Indian servants. The Indian slaves seemed to enjoy

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the hard work under their master, performing their daily tasks as faithfully as they could and hoping some day to be highly rewarded by their master. This valley at that time was covered by a dense forest so that the clearing of land was an important occupation for the Indian slaves.”

“After enough land was cleared the planting of crops was begun. The plowing was done by means of a sharp pointed piece of iron inserted in a piece of wood to which were attached rude handles. The plow was drawn by oxen.”

“By the end of 1856 more than fifty settlers, besides their Indian servants, had settled in Questa. As each new settler arrived he was assigned a section of land to clear and till. Farms were started, roads built, irrigation ditches dug. Even now the community was not safe from Indian attack. A working man in the fields had his gun and powder handy, for no one knew when the bad Indians would come. Occasionally a watch was put over the field so that the peones could work in peace.”

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“In 1836 Don Benito called a meeting of all the inhabitants to discuss plans for building a church. It was agreed that Saturday of each week all men should work on the new building, which was to have a double wall. Each wall was to be eighteen inches in thickness. Between the walls was a space a foot wide, to be filled with brush and cedar posts. Consequently the completed walls would be four feet thick. They were about fourteen feet high.”

“The heavy beams which you enjoy looking at so much when you should be praying are about eighteen inches thro'ugh and not less than twenty-five feet long. They were lifted in place with only thick strips of hide to aid the men in their work.”

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"The building was, I think, completed in 1840. It was decided to dedicate it to the holy name of San Antonio, patron of all farmers. A messenger was sent to Taos to bring father Martinez to direct the ceremony of the Mass."

"The thirteenth day of June was to be the great day for the fiesta. On that day all the men mounted their horses and wheeled them into two lines. The last eight men in each file carried guns in case of Indian surprise. Four women carried the image of San Antonio which had been donated by Dona Maria, Don Benito's wife; all the other women and the children followed. The women chanted the hymn Misterios de San Antonio and all the men joined in the chorus. The procession went to the four corners of the valley so that San Antonio might see the conditions of the crops."

"During the month of Mary - or May, as we call it now - all the men, women and children attended the ceremony of the Rosario dedicated to Mary, which took place every afternoon at four o'clock.